

Kathmandu -- Twenty-five health journalists and editors representing several Nepalese media organizations participated in a one-day media orientation on the H5N1 virus, known commonly as avian influenza. The orientation, sponsored by the Government of Nepal, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and its project, AI.COMM, was held on March 15 at the Hotel Himalaya in Lalitpur. The focus of the orientation was to provide the media with correct information about the virus and how it is transmitted as well as to explain the best practices to follow in order to prevent it and respond to it.

Today's orientation meeting was organized by AI.COMM and Thompson-Nepal. It is one of a series of activities being conducted by the government and USAID to inform the public on prevention of avian influenza as a result of the recent outbreaks in Jhapa District. In addition to the media orientation, AI.COMM is organizing capacity building workshops in 23 districts for human and animal health workers and will begin social mobilization and community theatre activities in Morang and Jhapa districts as well as Kathmandu Valley. These events will continue over the next few months.

"Although many countries including Nepal have managed to get avian influenza under control, the virus remains present and is still a lethal threat. As a key source of information, the media can play a crucial role in keeping the virus at bay. With this awareness-raising orientation session, the media will be better informed about avian influenza and can then share accurate and critical information necessary for all Nepalis to stay safe and healthy," said Beth S. Paige, Mission Director of USAID/Nepal.

AI.COMM is a USAID-funded global behavior change and communication activity to prevent and respond to avian influenza. It is managed by AED, a Washington-based NGO.

Influenza A virus subtype H5N1, also known as "bird flu," H5N1, is a subtype of the Influenza A virus which can cause illness in humans and many other animal species. A bird-adapted strain of H5N1, called HPAI A (H5N1) for "highly pathogenic avian influenza virus of type A of subtype H5N1", is the causative agent of H5N1 flu, commonly known as "avian influenza" or "bird flu". It is enzootic (established in non-human populations) in many bird populations, especially in Southeast Asia. One strain of HPAI A (H5N1) is spreading globally after first appearing in Asia. It is epizootic (epidemic in non-humans) and panzootic (affecting many non-humans in animals of many species, especially over a wide area), killing tens of millions of birds and spurring the culling of hundreds of millions of others to stem its spread. Most references to "bird flu" and H5N1 in the popular media refer to this strain.

